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FOREIGN OUTLOOK: WILL WE ATTACK SYRIA?

The White House is basking in the glow of public approval for the punitive air raid on Libya. But President Reagan's advisers know that a tougher nut remains to be cracked in the struggle against terrorism: Syria.

Last February I reported that Syria's President Hafez Assad is "the most effective troublemaker in the region" and provided support to terrorists who blew up the U.S. Marine barracks and the American Embassy in Beirut.

Then President Reagan said in April he would use military force against Syria if he had clear evidence of its sponsorship of a terrorist attack against Americans. West German and Israeli intelligence confirmed this month they are investigating the Syrian government's role in a terrorist attack in West Berlin and the attempted bombing of an Israeli airliner.

What makes Syrian strongman Hafez Assad more difficult to deal with than Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy? Just this: his close ties to the Soviet Union. You'll notice that Khadafy has been making noises about calling in Big Brother in the wake of the U.S. attack, hinting that he'll give the Soviets a naval base on the Mediterranean.

That's no mere vengeful move on Khadafy's part. He may be a flake, but he's clever enough to realize that his best protection lies in getting so close to the Kremlin that any anti-Libyan retaliation by the United States would raise the awful specter of a superpower confrontation.

That's precisely what has kept the Reagan administration from going after Assad, even though there's no question that the Syrian schemer has been responsible for at least as much anti-American terrorism as Khadafy.

Syria trumpets its friendship with the Soviets, still has thousands of Russian advisers and huge quantities of Soviet weaponry, and is Moscow's most dependable ally in the Middle East. Attacking Syria would mean taking on the Soviets; it wouldn't be the cheap and easy operation that Reagan brought off in Grenada and Libya. In poker terms, it's the difference between penny ante and a no-limit game.

The situation is complicated by the influence of so-called "Arabists" in the State Department who argue for a hands-off policy toward Syria, not from fear or caution over the Soviets, but from a sincere belief that Assad must be courted as the crucial figure in any Middle East peace settlement. Unfortunately, Assad so far has treated any friendly overtures from the United States as signs of weakness, and has rarely missed a chance to show his contempt for American diplomats. Assad even sent word once to Reagan's special envoy, Philip Habib, that he couldn't meet him because he was resting his presidential nerves at the beach.

Meanwhile, as the administration trains its guns on Khadafy, terrorist attacks planned in Syrian-controlled territory and supported by Assad, continue to endanger Americans in the Middle East.